

# **Syncretic Beliefs and Practices amongst Christians in Nigeria: Causes and Way Forward**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discussed the factors responsible for syncretic beliefs and practices amongst Christians in Nigeria. Secondary data were adopted in the paper. The data were collected from published and unpublished articles. The paper identified protection, power, childbearing, healing and deliverance, unfulfilled needs, miracles, a policy of religious tolerance and materialism as causes of syncretic beliefs and practices amongst Christians in Nigeria. To address and solve this problem, the paper hereby recommended that Church leaders in Nigeria should openly discourage members from engaging in syncretic practices, and should be enlightened on the effects of such engagements. They should be encouraged to trust and wait patiently in the almighty God as the source of their helps as Christians.

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**Keywords: Beliefs, Christians, Syncretism, practices**

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## **Introduction**

Syncretism consists of an attempt to reconcile disparate or contradictory beliefs while melding practices of various schools of thought. It is also seen as an attempt to merge and analogize discrete traditions, especially in the theology and mythology of religion. The Oxford Dictionary first records the word syncretism in English in 1618, derived from modern Latin *syncretismus*, drawing on the Greek word (*synkretismos*), which means "Synchronization with Crete". According to Asogwa (2008), the term "syncretism" first appeared in the English lexicon in approximately 1681, and is derived from modern Latin *syncretismus*, meaning "a union of communities". Syncretism is traceable to Plutarch and thus references Cretans' readiness to syncretic differences in opposition to an enemy. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the term shifted its focus from "unification against a common enemy" to concerns about the "incompatibility of different forces", in an attempt to reconcile Aristotelian and Platonist philosophers, and care-formed theologians. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term's meaning and usage shifted to the mixing of religious ideas and names of deities in the study of Greek and Roman religion.

Syncretism occurs when elements of other religions are uncritically borrowed and fused into Christianity, watering down or spoiling Christianity in the process (Chidili, 1997). Schreiter (1994) defined syncretism as the mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one,

if not both, of the systems, loses basic structure and identity. Pinto (1985) defined syncretism as the fusion of incompatible elements or the mingling of authentic notions and realities of the revealed faith with realities of other spiritual worlds. Asiegbu (2000) argued that syncretism is a process of combining different religious practices or beliefs, which may lead to a new synthesis or a strengthening, weakening or dissolution of old allegiances. It may indeed be viewed as an incorporation of incompatible beliefs or a reconciliation/fusion of different systems of belief. Therefore, religious syncretism implies the tolerance and acceptance of all religions and their worldviews. It is the belief that all religions lead to God and are capable of banqueting and salvaging the souls of their adherents. Hepler & Chapel (2022) viewed syncretism as "the adaptation of a dominant way of life or philosophy through its combination with other ways of life or philosophies." It can also be explained as the blending of aspects of different cultures into something new. Often, this process creates an entirely new subculture. If subcultures become large and strong enough, they can result in the creation of more subcultures through syncretism. As a term, syncretism is often used to refer to changes in cultures or religions. Sometimes, these two types of syncretism are combined, especially if culture and religion are intricately connected, such as Shinto religion and Japanese identity. At other times, cultural and religious syncretism can occur independently of each other. The main features of any syncretic occurrence are according to Hepler & Chapel (2022):

1. A common community, such as a geographic community or a social group
2. Interactions of different cultures in the same community
3. Exchange of cultural ideas or features between different subgroups in the community
4. Eventual fusion of prominent cultural ideas from two or more cultures into a unique cultural philosophy or lifestyle.

Syncretism occurs in different forms and ways. Religion Syncretism, cultural Syncretism etc. Religious syncretism is the blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system or incorporating into a religious tradition, beliefs from unrelated traditions. Religious syncretism according to Hepler & Chapel (2022) is the process of blending doctrines or practices of multiple religions into a new religion. An example of this type of syncretism is Jewish Buddhists. Cultural-religious syncretism occurs when cultural and religious syncretism occurs at the same time, especially if these two forms of syncretism are connected. An example of cultural-religious syncretism is Rastafarianism, in which Christian religion is blended with Pan-African ethnic identity and Caribbean slave religious practices. According to Informant 1 (2019, oral interview), religious syncretism often occurs when a foreign belief system and teachings are introduced and blended with an indigenous one. The new, hybrid religion then takes on a life of its own. Bamaiyi (2008:23) defined Religious syncretism as the act that exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system or the incorporation into a religious tradition. This can occur for many reasons and the latter scenario happens quite commonly in areas where multiple religious traditions exist in proximity and function actively in the culture or when a culture is conquered and the conquerors bring in their religious belief with them but do not succeed in entirely eradicating the old belief.

Syncretism beliefs and practices is a major problem globally among different religion. In Africa and Nigeria specifically, syncretism beliefs and practices are found among Christians. Mwititi, Nderitu & Nderitu (2017) observed that Church history is filled with the struggle against syncretism from political, social, religious and economic sources. In New Testament times, Greek, Roman and so-called "mystery religions" sought to undermine the Christian community through syncretism.

### **Causes of Syncretic Beliefs and Practices among Christians in Nigeria**

There are many factors responsible for syncretism beliefs and practices among Nigerian Christians. Some of the factors include; protection, power, childbearing healing and deliverance, unfulfilled needs, miracles, the policy of religious tolerance and materialism.

#### **Protection**

Protection from spiritual attacks and physical attacks in Nigeria is one of the reasons why many Nigerian Christians are involved in syncretism beliefs and practices. Onah, Eze, Nnadi, Mokwenye &

Ekweme (2021) noted that in the Nigeria context, poverty, illness and misfortune and other challenges which nature may pose, are thought to be caused by men of malicious or evil intentions. Accusations such as this hinged on their belief in the activities of sorcery, witchcraft and black magic. This is why misfortune of any kind is fought with dynamism to get liberated from one form of crisis or the other. Misfortunes have often pushed people to an extreme corner of doing things that they would not have otherwise done on their own accord. This is why some Christians out of the fear of the mysterious happenings have taken to the use of charms, talisman and other fetish practices and fortune-telling have become an alternative means to solve personal problems. Also, Anizoba & Akande (2021) opined that there are reasons for the belief and practice of charms alongside the Christian faith among the Igbo people in Nigeria. These include a need for personal security, the remedy against barrenness, protection against death, prevention of illness and misfortunes, enhancing one's business opportunities and progress, as well as attracting God's immediate intervention and other useful mystical powers of the universe. This shows a strong syncretistic practice in Igboland, where charms are used alongside Christian faith and sacraments. For such Christians, charms are unavoidable in an environment where life is not only insecure but also always under constant threat from unknown forces of evil. Njoku (2013) observed that, since institutionalised religion provides new values and satisfactory social groupings in an environment where the old African traditional religion had been demonised, individuals searching for affiliation with communities have found syncretistic practices more appealing and helpful for dealing with their uncertainties. Kasomo (2012) observed that diviners, witchdoctors, or sorcerers played (and continue to play) a key role in the protection of life from perceived enemies. Their knowledge and power enable them to proffer treatment for diseases, exorcism, and the incapacitation of an enemy. The practitioners also offer medicine for good fortune, love, success, security of person and property, and protection from sorcery and witchcraft (Peek, 1991).

### **Power**

Many Christians in Nigeria are into syncretist beliefs and practices because of their love for power. They want the power to express themselves in the communities where they live. Many Christians due to a lack of faith and patience in God and due to challenges they are passing through get involved in the practices of syncretism beliefs. Philemon, Felix, Josephat & Paulo (2015) supported this position when they observed that many professing Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, rely on the mystic powers of witchcraft and sorcery in times of great temptations and problems. In times of need, reliance on the ancestors seems irresistible to most Africans. This religious-concubinage makes people embrace what is good and helpful to them from both Christianity and African Traditional religions. Metuh (1985), pointed out that the role of the diviner is indispensable for the social, political, religious, and personal life of the Igbo person in Nigeria. This explains why it is always difficult for some people to shrug off divination, even after conversion to Christianity. Hence, some Christians resort to divination not only to obtain knowledge about the future but also and more so to discover ways of avoiding misfortunes such as sudden death and illness, as well as pacifying angry or revengeful ancestors. Often, some Christians approach diviners to know the "real" cause of their illness, and whether or not such causes are mystical and/or genetic. This behaviour underlines a crisis of faith as well as the difficulty of making the Christian faith an unadulterated part of their daily lives. For some people, this is a sign that Christian churches lack the power to address their material-spiritual problems and cannot, therefore, provide directives in times of crisis. The vast majority of Igbo writers blame this perception on the barrenness of Christian spirituality and contend that Christianity has failed to satisfy the spiritual desires of its members. Asiegbu (2000) suggests that the problem resides in the processes of keeping Igbo Christians true to their beliefs, thus guaranteeing the relevance of Christianity to both their material and spiritual worldview. Provided this gap exists between the two, the practice of divination will endure within what is a crisis of Christian faith. Philemon, Felix, Josephat & Paulo (2015) gave an example of what happened to a church leader in Angola concerning position-seeking. Before the session, he felt he would not step down. He challenged everyone that he would be re-elected. One day, early in the morning he went to a witch doctor that lived in a horrible place and whose speciality was to give full baths to clients seeking power. Having performed her job she asked him to

let in the next client. Soon after he opened the door, he saw his church member waiting for the same procedure. As a result of what happened, he eventually lost his membership and credentials.

### **Childbearing**

Another reason why many Nigerian Christians are into syncretist beliefs and practices is because of the inability to have children. Fertility in African society and Nigeria in particular is a thing that most people want by force using any means. Many Christians due to the problem of infertility have joined in the worshipping of River goodness and other forms of a secret cult. The problem of infertility among Nigerian Christian couples has led many to seek a solution in an ungodly way. Uche (2014) established in his study that infertility is among the factors that have made Christians go into syncretic practices.

### **Healing and Deliverance**

Seeking permanent healing and deliverance of many Nigerian Christians has led them into syncretism beliefs and practices. Many Christians today because of sickness have gone into the world to seek healing while still going to church and professing to be Christians. Philemon, Felix, Josephat & Paulo (2015) reported that in a survey carried out among Seventh-day Adventists in Nigeria during the summer of 2008, it was discovered that some members get involved in syncretic activities as a result of sickness, inordinate desires, funeral rites, childlessness, marriage rites and position seeking among others. Anizoba & Aande (2021) observed that some of the reasons for the practice of divination among Christians include finding ways of consolidating personal security and wealth; inquiring into the nature and causes of illness/ death; discovering ways of preserving life and making progress; to discover the mind of God for the future and one's destiny, and so on. Divination, therefore, illuminates suffering, alleviates doubts, and restores value and significance to the lives of such practitioners, especially in times of crisis. The practice of divination is as old as our humanity.

### **Unfulfilled Needs**

The unfulfilled needs of many Nigerian Christians have led to syncretism beliefs and practices. Many Christians have needs and desires that are unmet and they want a solution to these materials and spiritual problems. Philemon, Felix, Josephat & Paulo (2015) concluded that the visible manifestation of syncretism is multifaceted and largely motivated by the presence of unfulfilled felt needs of the church members. The need to maintain community solidarity and the inability to withstand life's challenges were highlighted as the main contributors to syncretic practices. Philemon, Felix, Josephat & Paulo (2015) noted that needs like wealth, struggle for power, visible progress in career, business success, finding a spouse, marriage, childlessness and fear of untimely deaths in the family, fear of the future and inordinate ambitions to rise to higher positions cause many to consult mystical powers. Sometimes when sickness comes and orthodox medication fails to heal the sick person, there is again the tendency of appealing to mystical power to handle the issue.

### **Miracles**

The zealotry to perform miracles and see vision by many Pastors, Prophets and Church founders have led many Pastors to engage in syncretism beliefs and practices. Onah, et al (2021) stated that some so-called men of God visit herbalists and medicine men to be given the powers to assist them in their duty to the detriment of some innocent Christians. This aberrant development is misleading and it calls for urgent attention. In other words, the Nigerian Christian unbearable quest for signs and wonders is such that leaves people doubting the potency of God's power of supremacy. The struggle for power and worldly pleasures leads us to do things we would not have done ordinarily. Indoctrination remains the problem of the majority of Nigerian Christians. Consequent upon this, it becomes a case of superficial knowledge of what one believes in. The last is the lack of faith in God. Almost all the aspect of worship in Nigerian churches is keenly performed but the behaviour of some double-faced Christians shows a lack of faith in God and what He can do. Mwititi, Nderitu & Nderitu (2017) opined that syncretism has found fertile ground with the current new religious movements and Pentecostals in African Initiated churches. With such movements, syncretism is spreading like wildfire throughout the world. Having detached themselves from the mainline churches, these modern sects have been turned into private businesses by their founders and pastors. With the proliferation, the founders have to cope with challenges, competition and struggle for customers in the religious world market. They are therefore obliged to advertise their goods befittingly and attempt to outwit other competitors by

attracting and keeping as many clients as possible. They scramble for members by all means; that is by preaching only what they would want to hear.

### **The policy of Religious Tolerance**

Another cause of syncretism according to Mwit, Nderitu & Nderitu (2017) is the policy of religious tolerance. In this case, syncretism becomes an effort to plug all the gaps in a given religion (Chidili, 1997). The innovations in Christianity are said not to provide for some of the functions the traditional values perform. The gospel displaces them without replacement. This is one of the reasons why the African Independent Church Movement is growing by geometrical proportion. These independent churches provide traditional needs for spontaneous prayer, exorcism and faith healing lacking in established churches (Luzbetak, 1992). While these satisfy the spiritual hunger of many Africans, they could have far-reaching negative effects when exaggerated. Another form of modern-day syncretism according to Ezenweke & Kanu (2015) in the church is usually nurtured and propagated during interreligious dialogues. Because the world is becoming one politically, technically and economically there is a felt need to be drawn together in a universal brotherhood. Religions are also called upon to unite with one another. Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) are told to find common beliefs to unite them, and in many cases, this places political pressure upon Christian churches, and the result is syncretism and the compromise of the gospel. Here, the quality and compatibility of religions are justified by subsuming their various categories under generic categories. For instance, we say that the writings of various religions are "sacred". We speak of the different deities of the different religions as "transcendent". We say we serve the same God.

### **Materialism**

The love for material things by many Nigerian Christians has led them to syncretist beliefs and practices. Mwit, Nderitu & Nderitu (2017) observed that these new-era preachers adopt many strategies and tactics to outwit their rivals. They excite, attract and draw their clientele mainly from among the youth and the middle-aged, both employed and unemployed; for the unemployed to help them secure employment in Jesus's name and for the employed to enable them to find promotion in Jesus's mighty name – all these in materialistic terms. This is syncretism tainting the message of the gospel with materialism. The founders/leaders are usually charismatic individuals, literate, and often loud and flamboyant in their lifestyles. They adapt very modern methods of preaching employing electronic gadgets and modern music. Their overall bearing in life is generally Western-oriented. Some of them employ all kinds of modern means of promotional advertisement to propagate their message. With all these, the corruption of the message of Christianity cannot but be obvious; giving way to newly formulated superstitious doctrines to compliment whatever is retained of the original teachings of the mother mainline churches from where they emerged (Corrilius, 1986).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper discussed the factors responsible for syncretic beliefs and practices amongst Christians in Nigeria. Secondary data were adopted in the paper. The data were collected from published and unpublished articles. The paper identified protection, power, childbearing, healing and deliverance, unfulfilled needs, miracles, the policy of religious tolerance and materialism as causes of syncretic beliefs and practices amongst Christians in Nigeria. Based on the identified causes, the paper hereby recommended the following:

1. Church leaders in Nigeria should openly discourage members from engaging in syncretic practices and should be enlightened on the effects of such engagements. They should be encouraged to be seeking refuge in the almighty God, as Christians.
2. Christian leaders in Nigerian Churches should intensify efforts in the process of making disciples in a way that deals effectively with the African worldview.
3. The church leadership must take seriously the responsibility of teaching their members all the doctrines, particularly key themes like the state of the dead, spiritualism, cosmic conflict, assurance of salvation, and Christ's victory over demonic powers.
5. The Church leadership in Nigeria must intentionally develop a continuous nurturing program, including an ongoing review of Biblical doctrines for newly baptized members.

5. Pastors should encourage their members to participate in church programs and activities to enhance spiritual growth.
6. Church leaders in Nigeria should come together and unite to enhance to fight the good fight of faith.
7. Church leaders in Nigeria should organize fasting, and constant prayers to fight against the spirit of syncretism beliefs and practices among the Christian faithful.
8. Church leaders in Nigeria should refrain from modifying the content of the gospel, to suit their financial needs. Rather, they should adhere to the actual content of the bible, and lead the Christians to the way of true Christianity, through spiritual nurturing and growth.
9. Church leaders in Nigeria should not only focus on prosperity only but strive to meet the spiritual needs of their members, through nurturing and teachings.

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